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ABSTRACT

The Advanced French Business course developed at St. John's University in New York is described. It emphasizes meeting students' needs for knowledge of the specialized vocabulary, expressions, and cultural information in a French-speaking business environment. It is designed for students who are at an intermediate-advanced level in French language, but have little knowledge of the business world and related issues. The course includes two approaches: (1) a requirement for a research project to stimulate students' thinking, and (2) regular visits to French-speaking companies and institutions in the United States to learn about their operations and services. It is noted that a key element in the course's success has been the cooperation of the business world and direct exposure to social and cultural realities of contemporary France. (LB)

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Cross-cultural awareness in teaching business French courses, in an academic environment: problems and difficulties

The Advanced French Business course developed at our University was designed to meet the students' need for knowledge of the specialized vocabulary, expressions and cultural information in a French speaking business environment. The course is designed for students who are at an intermediate-advanced level in French language, but have little knowledge of the business world and related issues. During the first half of the semester, class discussion and exercises focused on developing the needed language skills: that is the basic vocabulary, by using Le Goff's textbook. Only the first part of the chapter was covered. All written activities are controlled by exercises, included in the textbook, in which the students carefully follow written models and chose from a list the necessary formulas for acceptable business correspondence.

Cultural knowledge is emphasized in the second part of the semester and that is achieved by two different approaches, through two different assignments. The two assignments included one individual and one group presentation.

One of the main objectives, of a foreign language business course is to make students aware of the cultural differences that characterize the business world of another country, its economic and social structure and its technological achievements. The problem that professors and administrators are faced with is how to accomplish this objective, how to emphasize the cultural, economic and political realities of a particular country.

To enhance cross-cultural awareness and business knowledge in a French business language course, as well as to expose the students to the reality of the French-speaking business world without becoming too academic or too detached from the business world. We have introduced the following two approaches

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The first approach aims to increase the students' general knowledge and to stimulate their thinking. This is accomplished by encouraging them to become actively involved in a research project such as, using reference works available in the French and business section in the library, and presenting them orally in class. The second approach aims to increase the students' knowledge and experience with the French business world, and with French-speaking business companies. This is achieved by organizing regular visits to French speaking companies and institutions in the United States to learn how the companies operate and what their services are. These approaches can be implemented in all levels of business French courses, but need to be structured differently, depending on the students' level of French.

First, in the individual task, students are asked to chose and present in class, articles on business, economic or technological related topics. Some of the topics are: Banks, French Entrepreneurs, French Telecom, French Transportation, Nationalizations/Denationalizations etc. These topics are not completely new to the students since the technical vocabulary has already been covered during the first part of the semester. In preparing the topics students are expected to benefit in the following areas.

1) Learn how to use reference works and magazines available in the French and Business section of the library. This is not always an easy task since our students at this level, they never had before the opportunity to undertake a research work in French, or even to to read a French magazine or newspaper. At the library they are able to chose from the following magazines and newspapers, without excluding other sources as long as they can integrate it to their presentation: L'Express, Le Monde, Le Nouvel Economiste, Le Journal Français d'Amérique, France-Amérique, France Magazine, Le Nouvel Observateur, Libération, or Le Figaro.

2) Learn to look for and discover the cultural connotations concerning, especially, the press. For example, liberal or more conservative "points de vue" by reading Le Nouvel Observateur, or L'Express. The same applies between Libération and Le Figaro. So, it is hoped that, by preparing the research assignment, the students will learn how to interpret the different articles and, will be

able, during the presentation, to stress to their audience the connotations from one magazine to the other, from one newspaper to the other.

3) (The third expectation of this assignment is) To learn how to interpret, business, economic or, technological information. During this second part of the semester the students have the opportunity to assimilate the business French vocabulary that they were taught previously.

4) Become more aware, better acquainted with the technological, social and economic background of France. Usually whatever they learn from the textbook or the handouts given by the teacher during the semester is not enough to really know in depth a topic.

5) To learn how to write and present the topic that was covered by the speaker. This is not an easy task for the intermediate-advanced level student who most of the times, has never presented anything in French previously. Organizing the material, using the appropriate vocabulary, taking care of their expressions, these are the main difficulties they have to overcome and the pedagogical objectives to achieve at this point.

An other source of material that students can learn from and present it in class are a) La Valise des Affaires and, b) Challenge or Dossier Entrepreneurs, both supplied by the Pedagogical Services of the Chamber of Commerce of France.

Towards the end of the semester after all students have made presentations, the second approach, a more practical one is introduced: more specifically visits to French speaking companies and institutions in the NY city area are arranged or speakers, from these companies are invited to come to our campus and give a presentation. From my experience, I recommend the second alternative, because it is easier to have one guest speaker to come on campus than to have 15 to 20 students travel. (The first year that I taught Business French, I arranged for my class to visit a French company. I made all the arrangements but in the end I was the only one visiting the company.)

I have found that students benefit more from a guest speaker's presentation if they have reviewed in advance the materials in class and have prepared their questions. Usually guest speakers come from companies related to the topics that the students have already studied. The

topics are familiar, but the approach changes. It is not the teacher anymore nor the books or magazines that is the source of information but someone from the "Business world", someone who works in the field. As a result, our students become more motivated and enthusiastic for, they have the opportunity to observe how the issues discussed in class are applied in the Business World. In general , the French companies and our "guest speakers" are always willing to come and they are very helpful in answering and explaining our students' questions. Almost all of them bring material which stir the students' interest and curiosity. For instance, Minitel of the French Telecom not only shared handouts but also brought equipment to demonstrate how its services operate; or another example, T.D.C. presented the new "magnetic cards" used by the tolls in France or in all over the world included the States by the *filiales* of CSEE. Students are eager to talk to the "guest speakers" and their role is very important because the students see them as the mediators of the real Business World.

Naturally the teacher is responsible for locating French companies in the area, initiating all the contacts, and making the initial and final arrangements. From my experience, I would say that most companies are eager to give presentations in our campus. In fact companies seem to prefer the campus over their offices for two reasons: a) space restrictions, and b) larger publicity.

After the presentation of the guest speaker students are assigned to small groups and have to prepare written reports in which they are asked to a) summarize the services of the company b) comment on the presentation, and c) compare the particular company with an American company.

The reports are presented in class orally and discussions follow. This last part is very creative, students come up with many different ideas and a debate follow.

Concluding remarks

In the course of the last three years that the Busine French courses are offered, we had to address the following issues.

We had to make students realize that the purpose of the Advanced Business course is not to transform them to a native speaker, but to enable them to read and understand commercial

documents, and to expose them to the cultural, technological and business activities of today's France. With the two approaches, previously described: the theoretical and the practical one we try to introduce French culture and French cultural practices ("pratiques culturelles") to our students.

Living in the New York area, the cultural facilities, one can explore are tremendous of course, from the French Cultural Services, to other University campuses also to the corporate world, such as subsidiaries of French Telecom, French speaking banks, French businesses. Nevertheless, the cultural facilities that one can explore everywhere are immense. Except from the different University campuses across the country, from our experience the corporate world of foreign and French speaking firms is always willing if not enthusiastic to contribute in the classes. Either by sending their personnel to give presentations in the classrooms or by allowing our students to visit them and ask questions. Finally, this open dialogue between corporate world and academia is the most helpful since it motivates our students.

In conclusion, I would like to add that, from our experience, the key element for a successful Business French course or program in the academic environment is the cooperation with the business world and direct exposure to social and cultural realities of today's France.

It is important to remember that learning, for any student in a language course for "specific purposes", is never limited to only those assignments designated by the teacher. What a teacher explicitly explains in class should be part of what a student should learn. The class itself is one way to learn, and students should have the opportunity to learn from both: the teacher and direct sources; and they should get more practical information about the French business world or society by direct contact with French corporations, banks and mass-media. Most important, the institution and primarily the faculty should maintain the link between the academic institution and the business world or the cultural activities in order to be in a position to offer his/her students the best information he or she can.